music with backs turned

música de espaldas

For violin, double bass and piano

Pilar Miralles

2024

Written for Gerdan Ensemble and Daniel del Pino

Washington DC

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About the piece

I decided to write a piece in which performers are not looking at the audience, and the audience can see the performers, but with their backs turned to them, in there, at the back of the stage, as if they weren't playing for them (although they are). This leads to a sort of anti-spectacle situation in which the lower visual output of the performers (because the back of a body usually contains less information than the front, especially due to the absence of the face) allows for a bigger space for the members of the audience to encounter themselves. With little to see and a hindered sound projection, the piece proposes a space of reflection, both individual and communal, eased by an underload of these stimuli (sight and hearing). The encounter with these underloaded spaces/moments becomes increasingly rarer in a society where hurry and fatigue prevail.

A traditional Ukrainian song titled *Letila Zozulia* was provided by the ensemble and used as inspiration to compose this work. From it came its calm pace, diatonic sonority, and gentle hushes.

A few performance instructions

- As its title suggests, this piece should be played entirely with all performers facing away from the audience, with their backs turned, possibly in the back of the stage or the space dedicated to the performance. This includes the pianist, which means that the piano should be placed accordingly to allow this. If possible, the string players will perform seated on a chair and a stool, respectively (or however they consider themselves most comfortably seated).

- The piece does not feature a time signature and barlines have been replaced with a few dashed lines that are used to ease the separation of materials. A metronomic mark has been provided, but only as a reference. The aim of this was to allow performers not to interpret accurate rhythms or feel a specific metrical organization. Rather, they will play from the full score, observe when others come in and out, and breathe calmly with them.

- This piece works best when played at the end of a program including other pieces (regardless of their style/aesthetics). In that case, the piece allows the performers and audience to encounter themselves back. Of course, this is not a requirement and the piece can be played in any other circumstance.

- Some special techniques are used throughout the piece and explained in the score, but here are a few remarks about them:

    - The violin and piano players are asked at some spots to either whistle or hum softly. They can choose the option with which they feel most comfortable.
    - All the harmonics used on both string instruments are natural harmonics. I have indicated the corresponding string in Roman numbers.
    - Both string players will also encounter the “air noise” effect indicated with a squared head, which is performed by muting the string lightly on the indicated position and using very little bow pressure, producing a white noise-like sound. The string is indicated in Roman numbers as well.
    - Both the sustain and soft pedals of the piano should be kept depressed throughout the entire piece. Because some of the techniques of the piano part require the pianist to stand up, I recommend placing a couple of wooden or metallic wedges to block the pedals before the performance starts.
    - The piano part includes a few pizz. on some strings (D5, E5, and D2) and a few harmonics performed by muting low strings (G1, A1, and D2). It might be advantageous to mark beforehand (e.g. with a little sticker) the position of the harmonics on the affected strings, and the dampers of the strings involved in a pizz.
    - Lastly, the piano player is asked at the very end to use a coin to gently rub the surface of the metal frame (where the holes are) to obtain a sound similar to that produced by the string players when performing the “air noise” effect. The coin should be placed on the frame before the performance starts so that any tinkle is avoided when playing. Rub with the coin on its flat side.
    - Some dynamics are written in between quotation marks (those used for the humming/whistling, the pizz. in the piano, and the “air noise” in the strings and coin in the piano). They are applied to materials whose dynamics might be ambiguous because of the way the sound is produced. Try to adjust the volume so that the material is audible and suits the dynamic context in which it is happening.

All performers should face away from the audience, with their backs turned (including the pianist, if possible), and possibly in the rear of the stage. All players will preferably perform seated, in whichever way suits them best

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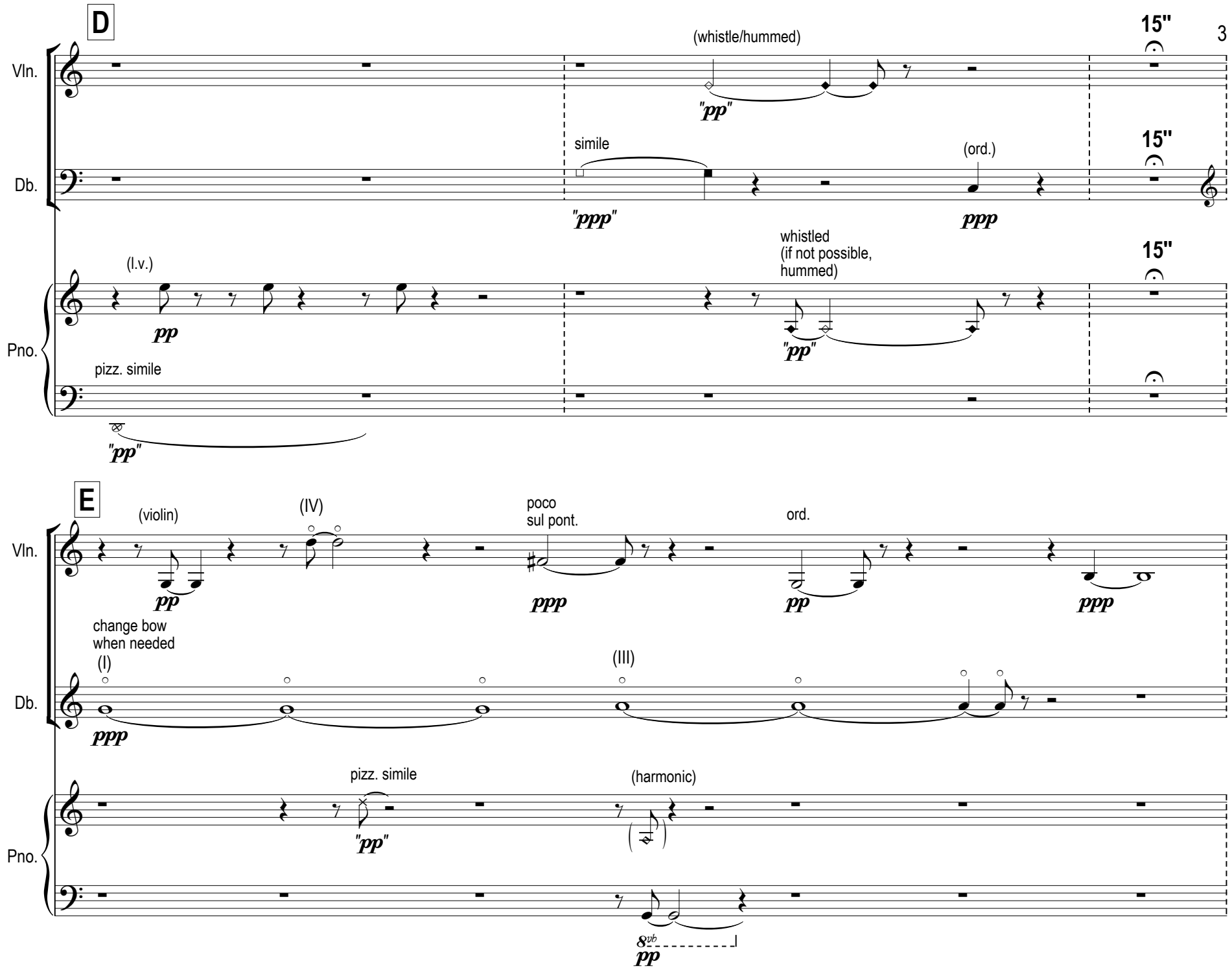
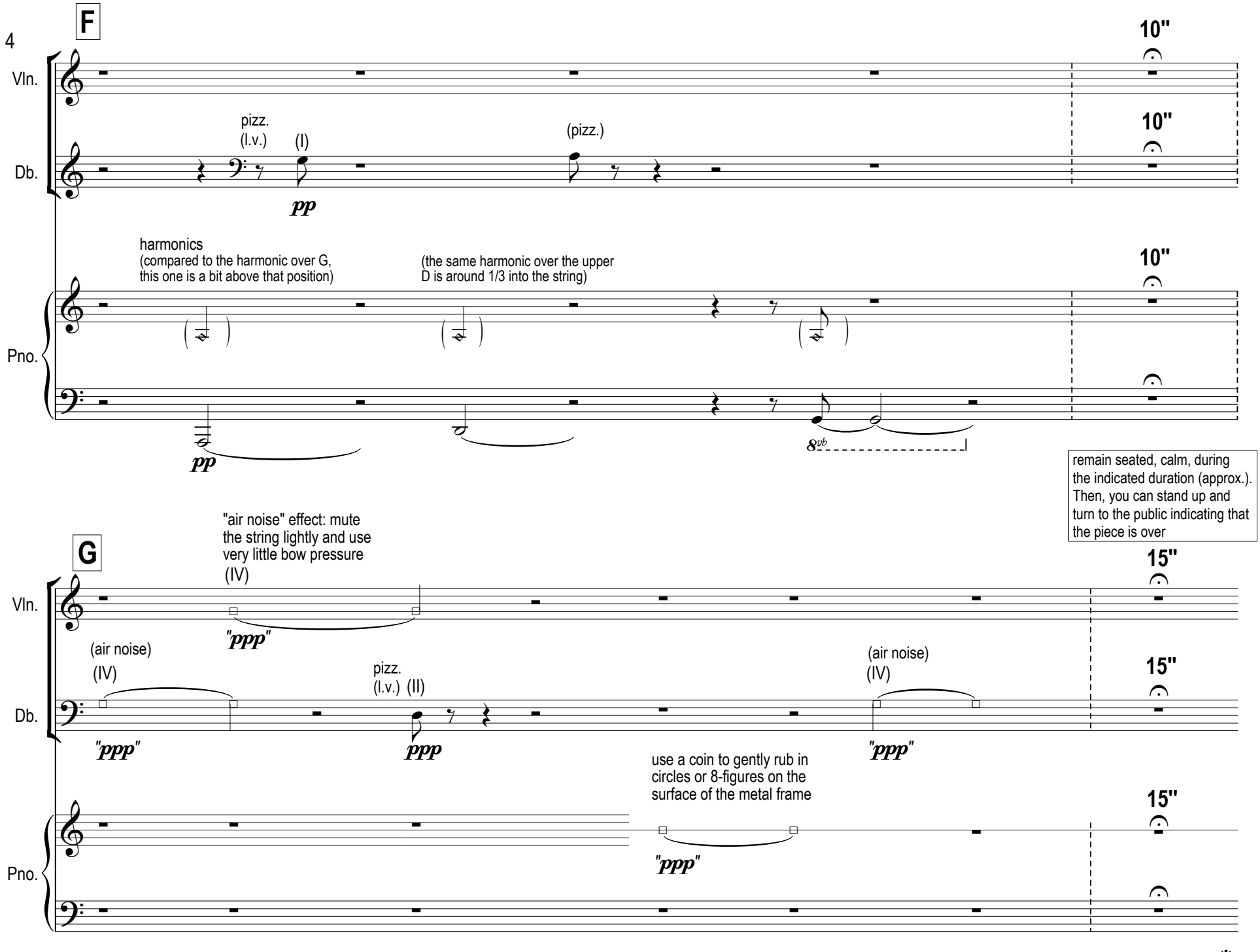
Duration: ca. 6'

B
Vln.
Db.
Pno.
(whistle/hummed)
10"
10"
10"
ppp
"pp"
ppp
pizz. on a string with the flesh of the finger (approx. a palm over the damper)
(l.v.)
"pp"
ppp
pp
C
Vln.
Db.
Pno.
(violin)
ppp
"air noise" effect: mute the string lightly and use very little bow pressure
(IV)
pizz.
(l.v.) (I)
pp
"ppp"
harmonics (place the flesh of the finger on the string of the note below)
(resulting note: can be found a few centimeters above the damper)
(pressed key)
simile
8vb
pp
8vb
pp
8vb


D
Vln.
Db.
Pno.
(whistle/hummed)
"pp"
15"
simile
"ppp"
(ord.)
ppp
15"
(l.v.)
pp
whistled
(if not possible,
hummed)
"pp"
15"
pizz. simile
"pp"
E
Vln.
(violin)
pp
(IV)
poco
sul pont.
ppp
ord.
pp
ppp
change bow
when needed
(I)
Db.
ppp
(III)
pizz. simile
"pp"
(harmonic)
Pno.
8vb
pp


F
10"
Vln.
Db.
pizz.
(l.v.)
(I)
pp
(pizz.)
10"
harmonics
(compared to the harmonic over G,
this one is a bit above that position)
(the same harmonic over the upper
D is around 1/3 into the string)
Pno.
pp
8vb
10"
remain seated, calm, during
the indicated duration (approx.).
Then, you can stand up and
turn to the public indicating that
the piece is over
G
"air noise" effect: mute
the string lightly and use
very little bow pressure
(IV)
15"
Vln.
"ppp"
(air noise)
(IV)
pizz.
(l.v.) (II)
(air noise)
(IV)
15"
Db.
"ppp"
ppp
"ppp"
use a coin to gently rub in
circles or 8-figures on the
surface of the metal frame
15"
Pno.
"ppp"